



*The Arabic Language in Israel:  
official language, mother tongue,  
foreign language.  
Teaching, dissemination and competence*

by Letizia Lombezzi

INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF ISRAEL, SOME DATA<sup>1</sup>

The analysis of the linguistic situation in the state of Israel cannot set aside a glance at the geography of the area, and the composition of the population. These data are presented here as such and without any interpretation. Analysis, opinion and commentary will instead be offered in the following sections and related to the Arabic language in Israel that is the focus of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> From "The World Factbook" by CIA, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>> (10 September 2016). The CIA original survey dates back to 2014; it has recently been updated with new data. In those cases, I indicated a different date in brackets.



**Territory:**

Area: 20,770 km<sup>2</sup>.

Borders with Egypt, 208 km; with the Gaza Strip, 59 km; with Jordan 307 km; with Lebanon 81 km; 83 km with Syria; with The West Bank 330 km.

Coast: 273 km.

Settlements in the occupied territories: 423, of which: 42 in the Golan Heights; 381 sites in the occupied Palestinian territories, among them: 212 settlements and 134 outposts in the West Bank; 35 settlements in East Jerusalem.

**Population:**

Population: 8,049,314 (data of July 2015).

These include the population of the Golan, around 20,500 people and in East Jerusalem, about 640 people (data of 2014).

Mean age 29.7 years (29.1 M, F 30.4, the 2016 data).

Age pyramid (data of 2015): 0-14 years: 27.95% (1,151,247 M / F 1,098,632); 15-24 years: 15.5% (637,758 M / F 609,597); 25-54 years: 37.13% (1,528,271 M / F 1,460,772); 55-64 years: 8.57% (336,662 M / F 353,352); 65 and over: 10.85% (389,401 M / F 483,622)

**Composition of the population:**

Conventional groups.

Hebrews 75%, understood as belonging to the ancient Jewish people, of whom were born in: Israel 74.4%; Europe / America / Oceania 17.4%; Africa 5.1%; Asia 3.1%.

25% non-Jews, primarily Arab.

**Language and religious affiliation:**

Language: Hebrew (official); Arabic (officially used for Arab minority), English (most commonly used foreign language).

Religion (data of 2013): Hebrews 75%; Muslim 17.5%; Christians 2%; Druze 1.6%; Another 3.9%.

**Details of The West Bank (WB):**

Population: Arab 83%, Israel 17%.

Languages: Arabic, Hebrew (spoken by Israeli settlers and many Palestinians), English (widely distributed).

Religion: Muslim 80-85% (mostly Sunnis), 12-14% Jews, Christians 1-2.5% (mainly Orthodox rite), other 1%.

**Detail of Gaza Strip (GS):**

Population: Arab Palestinians.

Languages: Arabic, Hebrew (spoken by many Palestinians), English (widely distributed)

Religion: Muslims 98.0 - 99.0% (predominantly Sunni), Christian <1.0%, other <1.0%.



#### Education and training:

Literacy 97.8%, of which: males: 98.7%, female: 96.8% (data of 2011)  
compulsory education up to 16 years.

Military obligation: 18 years old and thirty-two months if man; for twenty-four months if women.

### 1. ARABS AND ISRAELIS, OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERACTION

A first predisposing factor for interaction is geography.

In fact, data concerning the territory and the population clearly show that these two communities, intended as a linguistic community for what concerns us here, live in close contact. Israel is the only state that has borders with neighbors belonging to a unique cultural-linguistic-religious group. In Israel, being Arab or Muslim (or both, together) and Arabic-speaking means always being at the second position in population censuses. This is comprehensible and due to historical factors and reasons, but these facets are not assessed here. The situation is reversed in the West Bank and Gaza: being Jewish and speaking Hebrew put you in second place of the aforementioned censuses, leaving residual percentages to other identities.<sup>2</sup>

A second predisposing factor is the young age of the population, with a high percentage of same-age students or university students. The young and the young adults of the two communities often attend the same training places, especially at the university.

A further factor is, ultimately, the military service: mandatory and for a quite long period of time. Being a soldier on duty at a check-point, for example, expose the Israelis to daily contact with the Arabs, and vice versa. They inevitably need to talk each other, ask questions, give answers, argue, explain, complain.

### 2. THE ARABIC LANGUAGE IN ISRAEL: OFFICIAL LANGUAGE, MOTHER TONGUE, FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Arabic in Israel constitutes a very particular case study: mother tongue and foreign language on the one hand, official and spoken language on the other. In this regard, let's observe the detailed table of Brosh (Brosh 2013: 2):

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. the data mentioned in the Introduction.



Hebrew school network: L1 Hebrew: Grade 1 onwards. L2 English: Grade 3 throughout the rest of the school system. L3 MSA: 7th to 10th grade (optional in 11th and 12th grades. Schools may choose to offer French or Russian instead).
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Arabic school network: L1 Arabic: Grade 1 onwards. L2 Hebrew: Grade 2 throughout the rest of the school system (optional in the first grade). L3 English: Grade 6 throughout the rest of the school system.
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Table 1. Languages taught in the Hebrew and Arabic school networks.

We immediately note that Hebrew is the first foreign language of the curricula in Arab schools, but not vice versa. Of course the motivation is not only ideological, nor do I want to suggest here such a simple explanation. Rather, the reason is that English deserves the place of first foreign language in all the schools of the world, including in Israel. However, if the claim is valid and undeniable, the same should work for Arab schools, which seem to be insensitive to this global educational alignment. It gives the impression that the Arabs have to pay a 'cultural tribute of hospitality' setting Hebrew as the second language of their curricula, instead of English. Who has spent some of his time in Israel knows that this asymmetry is more serious in theory than in practice, which indeed attests everyday regular relations and exchanges, linguistic or not, between the two halves of the population.

It is interesting for our discourse to focus on Israel, and observe in the same country three realities usually found in two or more different countries. In Israel, the Arabic language is legally admitted as an official language, with special regard for the Territories of the Palestinian National Authority; it is the target language for the Arab schools; it is spoken by Arabic speakers; in theory, we expect to find it as a foreign language in the curricula of Jewish schools. In principle, Arabic is scheduled three hours a week for levels 7-9 and 11-12. In practice, not many efforts are spent to guarantee instruction in Arabic as a foreign language (cfr. Amara 2005 and Amara 2006). Arabic is also celebrated every December 18<sup>th</sup>, with the 'Arabic Language Day'. Regrettably, the celebrated language is the so called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is not the real mother tongue of Arab speakers<sup>3</sup>: they adopt informal Arabic and not the standard one in daily interaction.

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<sup>3</sup> There is general agreement among scholars on this point: standard Arabic is not the real mother tongue of the Arabs, who interact by the local variant. This triggers an interesting debate on the need to teach dialects – and not the standard register – to students. Ferguson, Mejdell, Durand, Elgibali, to name but few have addressed this topic. For further reference see Elgibali A., 2005, *Investigating Arabic. Current Parameter in Analysis and Learning*, Brill, Leiden.



It is helpful at this point to have an overview on the various languages that have met in Israel, from the past until today.

The area under the control of the State of Israel – intended as detailed in the Introduction – has always been subject to interferences by languages other than Arabic: for political reasons (e.g.: Turkish, English) or of religious worship (e.g.: Italian). For example, in the Ottoman times and until 1917 Turkish was the official language of administration and power, while colloquial Arabic was the prevailing one in everyday life. During the British mandate, the spread of standard Arabic has been favored, but it was soon realized that the weak competence in vernacular Arabic was of obstacle for understanding the locals, and it had originated comprehension and safety related problems too.

In the academic sector and since the mid-90s some scholars and researchers pushed toward the birth of specific projects dedicated to spoken Arabic, as was the case of the well-known 'proficiency movement' in the United States. In the same period, educational programs like *Ya Salām* and *Let's talk* started to be promoted in Israel, but focused exclusively on standard Arabic. Some of these initiatives have been renovated and are still on-going: they try to add value to the linguistic competence as the key for dialogue and cooperation between the Arabs and the Israelis.<sup>4</sup>

Israel, where Arabic is both mother tongue and foreign language, has not yet decided how to spread and master the competence of this key-language, nor has set clear criteria for the crucial choice between the standard or spoken variety.

In reality, the major problem in Israel is that spoken Arabic, for a long time and in part still today, has represented the language in use by a portion of citizens – ruling élite excluded – that play a weaker influence in the society. Therefore, their language had a less prestigious status, thing that has limited its spread. In addition, because of the understandable security concerns, it is not likely that a native Arabic-speaking citizen receives a security clearance and is allowed to teach in Israeli schools. So, schools and institutes suffer from the lack of specific programs and staff<sup>5</sup>, a bit resembling the Europeans schools and curricula. It is not easy to find professionals in the field of teaching, well skilled in linguistics, pedagogy and Arabic language. In the Israeli schools, like in many other educational environments, the asymmetry between standards and variants hasn't found a solution yet: the natives learn informal Arabic from their family; those who have Hebrew as their mother tongue study (can study) at school the Standard Arabic, albeit without achieving an effective functional competence. It happens the same to European students: they learn standard Arabic during the formal instructional cycle, but they are not competent enough for interacting with natives in real-life situations.

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<sup>4</sup> See the initiative for the Arabic Teaching Curriculum promoted by The Abraham Fund <[www.abrahamfund.org](http://www.abrahamfund.org)> or the program developed by the Inter-Agency task force <[www.iataskforce.org/entities/view/359](http://www.iataskforce.org/entities/view/359)> (30 October 2017).

<sup>5</sup> See the data published by The Washington Institute about the current lack of Arabic teachers in Israel <[www.thewashingtoninstitute.org](http://www.thewashingtoninstitute.org)> (27 October 2017).



### 3. STANDARD ARABIC, SPOKEN ARABIC, HEBREW: COUPLES FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF EFFECTIVENESS IN COMMUNICATION

A research carried out by Ibrahim and Peretz (Ibrahim, Peretz 2005) was based on the triangulation standard Arabic-spoken Arabic-Hebrew. It consisted in offering to a sample of speakers some vocabulary, then they were asked to translate it. With reference to the vehicle of transferring for meanings, it was observed that spoken Arabic works better and faster than standard Arabic and Hebrew, during the processing of input.

I use the term 'better and faster' because reaction time was the key factor taken into consideration for assessing the priming effect and the time for taking the lexical decision. Spoken Arabic facilitates processing more than the other two languages. See below part of the results presented by Ibrahim-Peretz (Ibrahim-Peretz 2005: 59):

**Table 1. Mean Reaction Times in Milliseconds and Standard Errors (SEm) and Percentage of Errors in Lexical Decision for SA Targets Primed by Words in SA, LA and Hebrew**

	Words language of the prime			Spoken Arabic pseudowords language of the prime		
	SA	LA	Hebrew	SA	LA	Hebrew
Unrelated	1074 (24) 11.4%	1085 (24) 9.5%	1086 (22) 12.0%	1149 (18)	1157 (17)	1158 (16)
Related	890 (16) 4.8%	1040 (26) 7.6%	1032 (24) 8.6%	10.7%	10.3%	11.9%
Priming effect	185 6.6%	45 1.9%	54 5.4%			

**Table 2. Mean Reaction Time in Milliseconds and Standard Errors and Percentage of Errors in Lexical Decisions for SA Targets primed by Words in SA, LA, and Hebrew.**

This means that in the two different pairs, standard Arabic and Hebrew have the same weak role for the production of meanings and, above all, that the cognitive system for the standard and the spoken are two 'different things'. Instead, standard Arabic and Hebrew behave as a second language in the studied pairs. This constitutes a confirmation that the asymmetry between the formal and informal register is actually internal to the Arabic language and has precise cognitive bases. Judith Rosenhouse in her research and analysis on Standard Arabic vocabulary and speech, referring to Arabic in use among Arabic speakers in Israel, concludes:

Since literary Arabic is the prestigious variety of Arabic, while colloquial Arabic is hardly deemed (by its speakers, even today) to merit any official attention or reference, colloquial Arabic speakers will naturally tend to borrow from literary Arabic more than literary Arabic (writers or speakers) would tend to borrow from





colloquial Arabic. This prestige factor is also well-known in language communities that borrow from other languages. (Rosenhouse in Ditters and Motzki 2007: 664-5)

The above quotation together with the research of Ibrahim and Peretz, helps to reinforce the view that standard Arabic is perceived and used as a real foreign language itself. All this further proves the need to intentionally teach colloquial Arabic and assign priority to it for being 'the language in use', and detaining a strongest communicative power.

Returning to the instructional curricula recalled by Brosh (see above: table 1), we argue that the variant of Arabic (in principle) studied in Israeli schools is the so-called Modern Standard Arabic, which Israeli students will hardly listen from neighbors, friends, acquaintances.

Offering training in Standard Arabic does a disservice to students in general (Palmer 2007), and this is particularly true in a context such as the Israeli one. There, the level of daily interaction in colloquial Arabic is higher than elsewhere.

Undoubtedly, the Arabic language in Israel is extremely widespread. Nevertheless, proficiency in Arabic is not adequate to the level of its dissemination. The study of standard Arabic, rather than the colloquial hinders the development of pragmatic skill for immediate needs.

Leaving apart political considerations, however, it can be concluded that the Israeli education system remains based on the acquisition of skills in standard Arabic only. It is proved that it is not enough for developing the necessary competence in our students, in Israel or in Europe.

#### 4. ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS: THE COLLOQUIAL REGISTER AS 'LINGUISTIC RIGHT'

At this point, after having analyzed the status of Arabic in Israel, it is inevitable to face the theme of the 'right' to one's mother tongue, to use it and to see it respected, widespread, defended. The UNESCO conference held in Paris in 2001, presented the Declaration on Cultural Diversity, where it is written:

All persons should therefore be able to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons should be entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons should be able to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamentals freedom. (UNESCO 2001: 5)

I have already mentioned that the Arabic dialect is the only and real mother tongue<sup>6</sup> of native speakers, meaning that they learn it in the family and in common

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<sup>6</sup> K. Versteegh remembers us that "The colloquial language is everybody's mother tongue; people only learn the standard when they go to school" (Versteegh 2001: 187); Gibson (Gibson in



everyday contexts. The standard language was instead supported by the colonial powers. They raised its role, substituting it from time to time with French or English both in daily life and in the public administration. Following this bad example, the ruling élite of the Arab countries self-forced themselves to use standard Arabic, even after decolonization, to replace the European languages of the mandatory powers with one unique 'pan-Arab language'. This was a side effect of Pan Arabism: in the attempt to portrait the Arab World as one single block, standard Arabic played the role of the unifying language of the united Arab community. MSA was chosen to replace English and French in the Levant as well in the Maghreb, neglecting to observe that no Arab owned (or owns today) full competence in the standard language, a part the minority of scholars specialized in Arabic and linguistics. The mistake of assigning priority to standard Arabic began with the mandatory states, but after decolonization has mainly depended on the Arab side. Arab governors and politicians had too little determination, they were yielding too much to the West, and they were excessive compliant towards the Western powers.

Durand (Durand 2014: 65) on the question-standard dialects language defines "dialectophagy" (*dialettologia*) the deliberate marginalization of the true mother tongue of the Arabs, and "self-linguistic imperialism" (*autoimperialismo linguistico*) the attitude that has determined, for political reasons to misleading imitation of European nationalism.

Today, teaching spoken Arabic at school could certainly be an excellent choice for building truly competence in students and also for the recovery of an identity, as a right.

#### CONCLUSION. FROM ISRAEL TO EUROPE: THE INTERESTS AND PRACTICES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Rights, whatever sphere concern, always intersect with ideologies and politics. Encouraging the promotion of a dialect, instead of the standard, opens the fight for the control and use of specific resources dedicated to certain activities. Whatever the country in question, Arabic speaking or not, promoting a dialect automatically means to take resources away from another language or variety. It is crucial to remember that language is something strongly interlinked with identity.

The conflict between pro and anti spoken Arabic changes into an economic and political discourse, rather than remaining a merely intellectual speculation.

In conclusion, I would like to come back to Europe. The main issue addressed by this article concerns 'teaching and learning'. In this regard, we observe the same problem in our continent as well as in Israel. What does in practice mean taking the decision to implement early literacy of learners in a dialect, with prior development of listening and comprehension skills? It means to allocate specific resources to this

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Rouchdy 2002: 25) states: "[...] the standard variety of Arabic is not spoken by any social group as mother tongue".





activity. Together with other factors, the competition for the assignment of funding, motivates the obstacle to the pro-colloquial approach.

I conclude, affirming that the underlying reasons for obstacles to new teaching practices are not only technical, scientific and motivated. They often relate to the lower sphere of resources for a macro-sector. Standard language or dialect or literature? That is: with little resources, the monopoly of traditional education systems will hardly yield to the pressures of the innovators that support teaching practices toward the achievement of functional competence. These innovators, meanwhile, had better continue to prepare, to upgrade and stay ready for offering new plans and opportunities for future linguistic training, hopefully more effective.

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**Letizia Lombezzi** investigates on Arabic dialectology and teaching methods. She is also interested in the current political issues and conflicts of the Middle East. She has been Visiting PhD at The University of Texas-Austin, The American University of Beirut, and the University of Leipzig. She is member of the AIDA – Association Internationale de Dialectologie Arabe.

[letizia.lombezzi@uniroma1.it](mailto:letizia.lombezzi@uniroma1.it)